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ABSTRACT

To determine existing employer perceptions of communication needs, or functions, and of the role of the speech communication major in fulfilling these needs, a 32-item questionnaire was sent to 85 personnel managers in the Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse, New York, areas. Respondents were instructed to suppose that they were to hire a college graduate with a four-year degree that had specifically prepared him or her in oral and written communication, mass media production and analysis, and organizational dynamics. Given this context, respondents were presented with two separate 13-item indices: a performance by the college graduate index and a training of others by the college graduate index. The remaining questions were concerned with the the importance of communication skills in the respondents' companies. Results indicated that, on the whole, the personnel directors strongly endorsed the value of communication skills to their companies' operations. Mean score differences between those organizations that had implemented a communication training program and those that had not were insignificant. Interestingly, prospective employees' ability to train other employees in various communication skills was rated somewhat higher in importance than was actual ability to perform a variety of communication functions themselves. (HOD)

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EMPLOYER PERCEPTIONS OF NEEDED COMMUNICATION FUNCTIONS IN BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

A dozen years ago, H.F. Harding, Professor of Speech at the University of Texas at El Paso, was asked for his predictions concerning the speech profession in 1984. His response to the question, "Would you advise a college sophomore to enter speech as a lifetime career?" was unequivocal. "I'd have to tell him to go somewhere else," Harding replied. "Speech has been second class since 1925. By 1984 it will be third class" (Harding, 1972).

Apparently not everyone has heeded Harding's crisp advice. New departments of speech communication have sprung up, established programs continue to attract some of the best and brightest, a new professional organization, the World Communication Association, has been formed, and original journals, such as SCA's Critical Studies in Mass Communication, have been spawned. Of course, some of this growth must be attributed to a sustained interest in the communication process which is shared by a number of allied disciplines. Nonetheless, the years since Harding's remarks have witnessed a significant change in the shape, if not necessarily size, of the speech communication profession. In particular, those educated in the profession have sought employment, with some measure of success, outside of the traditional twin hemispheres of teaching and research.

At the time of Harding's prognosis, Robert Oliver, Professor Emeritus at Pennsylvania State University, had his own to offer. "With confidence," Oliver asserted, "I foresee that our field of speech will emerge (already is

emerging) from the provincialisms that have hampered it in the past. And I foresee that the educational needs of the future (already apparent) will greatly expand the challenges and the opportunities of our chosen field" (Oliver, 1972). Clearly, the development Oliver projected can only come about if speech communication graduates are successful in obtaining appropriate non-academic positions in both the private and public sectors.

This paper is concerned with the prospects which the undergraduate speech communication major is likely to face in exploring non-traditional careers. Such alternative careers have already begun to be identified in earlier studies (for example, McBath & Burhans, 1975; Blankenship, 1980), and include potential positions in public relations, personnel management, corporate communications, organizational development and training, and media production.

Some promise of opportunity in these fields has been suggested by working professionals themselves. In the trade journal Marketing & Media Decisions, for instance, Marcella Rosen, a Vice President of the N.W. Ayer Agency, stated that

> The media person of the future will have a much more challenging job than we have. The media professional will have to be an advertising professional with media expertise and computer knowhow, and marketer aware of social trends, a psychologist, a person who has knowledge of the economic situation. Thus he will understand human values, behavior, and priorities as well as the economy and the available media...The media person of the future will thus be a genuine communicator and a humanist in the traditional and meaningful sense of both words" (Rosen, 1981, 164).

Management consultant Sandra O'Connell saw similar promise

when she described communication as "the growth field of the Seventies" (O'Connell, 1978).

Such reports are encouraging, but they leave unanswered a host of critical questions: Do employers themselves consider communication skills fundamental to their employess and to the general operation of their organizations? Are graduates of speech communication programs seen as capable of filling positions which require substantial competencies in oral and written communication? Do the graduates of these programs, in fact, have the skills necessary to perform communication functions in business and public service? And perhaps most importantly, just what are the communication needs identified by employers?

It is to the last of these questions that the present study is largely addressed. Specifically, the study reported here sought to determine existing employer perceptions of communication needs, or functions, and of the role of the speech communication major in fulfilling these needs.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several studies, many employing survey methods, have posed such questions as, "How important to your company are communication skills?" and "What are the most important communication needs for your company?" For example, Spencer and Van Rheenen (1981) found that nearly 90 percent of their respondents considered communication skills "vital" to their organizations. Comparable results on the overall importance of communication skills have been obtained by

Taylor and Buchanan (1973); Belohlov, Popp, and Porte (1974); and Swenson (1980).

In general, employers appear to recognize the essential role played by communication in organizational life. But a question raised by some researchers is whether employers follow through on this perception--in effect, whether they choose to put their money where their mouths are. The Spencer and Van Rheenen (1981) survey, for instance, indicated that only about one in four companies responding had a formal communication training program. This figure seems linked to a number of factors, including the nature and size of the company and the kinds of employees requiring training. For example, Taylor and Buchanan (1973) found that their sample of technical organizations was more likely to provide communication training than was their sample of non-technical companies, with about 75 percent of the former offering it compared to roughly 50 percent of the latter. With a larger sample, Belohlov, Popp, and Porte (1974) surveyed companies listed among Fortune magazine's famous 500. Of the 84 companies responding, 91.7 percent indicated that employees received at least occasional training in oral and written communication.

On the other hand, a survey of corporate training personnel conducted by Wasylik, Sussman, and Leri (1976) found fewer than 42 percent of the employees at the companies involved received any form of communication training. And even though Samovar and Weitzel (1979) reported

that the international organizations they surveyed rated communication skills "very high" in importance to their operations, a later study discovered that training in intercultural communication skills at such companies was relatively rare, with nearly three-fourths of the companies having no such training nor planning any (Samovar, Tamayo, and Weitzel, 1983).

Perhaps many companies are like those surveyed by Meister and Reinsch (1978): fewer than half the manufacturing firms questioned had existing communication training programs, although many respondents predicted an increase of effort and expenditures to that end. Such well-intentioned remarks may not be too difficult to accept in light of the fact that many employees also regard communication skills as essential to their work.

Two groups of Liberal Arts alumni surveyed by Woodlief (1982) revealed oral and interpersonal communication skills to be among the most frequently mandated by their jobs. Surveys of speech communication alumni suggest that skills in speaking, group problem solving, and not surprisingly, writing, are prized in business and industry (Weitzel and Kirk, 1977; Blankenship, 1981). Similar results have been obtained among business graduates (DiSalvo, Larson, and Seiler, 1976) and journalism majors (Spicer, 1979).

In fact, employers seem to be in relative agreement with alumni and employees as to the importance of certain communication skills. Among the most frequent skills listed

as necessary by employers are listening (Belohlov, Popp, and Porte, 1974; DiSalvo, Larson, and Seiler, 1976; Wasylik, Sussman, and Leri, 1976); speaking (Kessler, 1981; Harper, 1982); and writing (DiSalvo, 1980). Skills in group discussion and decision making also appear to be important (Nieder, 1981).

Although there seems to be near-consensus on the general importance of communication skills in business organizations, employers do appear to differ on their degree of commitment in achieving employee competencies in these skills. In-house trainers, for instance, have complained of the lack of support for their efforts by top management. The Wasylik, Sussman, and Leri (1976) sample shared a conviction that communication skills can indeed by taught and learned, but they also felt that executives, who are ultimately responsible for success or failure of such programs, are likely to avoid participation in them; company brass received communication training in only slightly more than half of the companies surveyed. In effect, there may be a prevailing belief among managers that communication skills, desirable as they are, are needed by other people. They, naturally, already know how to communicate effectively.

This belief may extend into decisions made by managers when hiring individuals to perform communication functions needed by organizations. Assuming that communication skills are natural outgrowths of managerial experience,

or that they are easily and simply acquired, could lead employers to overlook the specialized training of graduates in speech communication. As a matter of fact, there have been several reports in the literature which suggest that many employers are hard-pressed to identify what it is that speech communication majors study (Taylor and Buchanan, 1973; McBath and Burhans, 1975; Heath, 1976; Jamieson and Wolvin, 1976). Variation in names for the degree--"speech", "communication", and "speech communication" being only the most common--seem to lend to the uncertainty (Rudolph, 1979; Spencer and Van Rheenen, 1981).

Few solid conclusions have emerged when examining the substantive question of function--what types of job responsibilities speech communication graduates can fulfill. Nomenclature aside, both "speech" and "communication" majors in the Spencer and Van Rheenen (1981) study were perceived to be qualified to train other employees in the areas of public speaking, interoffice communication and interpersonal relations, to engage in diagnosing problems in internal communication, and to assist in the company's public relations. Overall, the potential careers most often indicated as appropriate for speech communication graduates have included: personnel and employee relations (Heath, 1976; O'Connell, 1978); public relations (Taylor and Buchanan, 1973; Heath, 1976); internal communications, including the preparation of the "house organ" (Taylor and Buchanan, 1973; Spicer, 1979); customer relations; marketing and sales; media writing; and organizational

consulting.

However, cautions have been raised about the potential for employment in certain of these areas. Some have argued the necessity of a graduate degree and teaching experience as prerequisites for either in-house or external training and consulting (Baron and Shoemaker, 1977; Redding, 1979). Others have advised that, although opportunities may appear attractive and appropriate to speech communication professionals, additional data are needed to determine whether jobs actually exist in these areas and whether such graduates are in fact qualified (Weitzel and Gaske, 1984).

Studies have demonstrated that graduates have not been confined to teaching and research careers, but have found satisfaction in a variety of occupations which call for specialized training in communication. Current positions of speech communication alumni have been reported in sales and marketing (Van Rheenen, Merrill, and Callahan, 1979); governmental affairs (Jamieson and Wolvin, 1976); internal communications (Kessler, 1981; Hellweg and Phillips, 1983); and in public relations (Weitzel and Kirk, 1977; Blankenship, 1980, 1981). The list of positions occupied by speech communication graduates is probably much longer, but as Weitzel and Gaske (1984) point out in their recent review article, systematic career tracking of alumni is still insufficient for one to draw firm conclusions regarding genuine, long-term job opportunities.

In summary, existing literature on non-traditional

career options for speech communication graduates suggests that employers tend to recognize and care about communication problems in their organizations, yet they do not necessarily identify graduates with "speech", "communication", or "speech communication" degrees as most suitable for performing needed communication functions in addressing these problems.

The study reported in this paper raised six research questions: (1) How important do employers feel communication skills are to their company's operation? (2) What percentage of employers have training programs in communication skills? Of those employers who have such programs, is the training conducted in-house or by an external agency and what kind of skills are taught? (3) How important do employers feel it is for college graduates in communication who might be hired by their company to be able to perform 13 communication tasks? Are there differences between companies which do and do not have training programs in communication skills on the importance assigned to these 13 tasks? (4) How important do employers feel it is for college graduates in communication who might be hired by their company to be able to train other company employees in 13 communication activities? Are there differences between companies which do and do not have training programs in communication skills on the importance assigned to these 13 training activities? (5) What is the relationship, and is there a significant

difference, between employers' rated importance of the performance variables and the training variables? and (6) With what courses, other than those in communication, would college graduates improve their employability?

METHOD

Sample

The population from which the sample was drawn was comprised of individuals listed in the 1983 Membership Directory of American Society for Personnel Administration. Individual names of personnel managers were selected on the basis of their company's location. The criterion used for inclusion was that the company's location was in the Buffalo, Rochester, or Syracuse, New York area. Using this criterion, a total of 85 names resulted.

In February, 1984, a questionnaire was mailed to the 85 individuals following the procedures described by Dillman (1978). A total of 71 surveys was returned, for a response rate of 83.5 percent.[1]

Instrument and Procedures

A 32-item questionnaire was developed. First, the respondents were presented with a hypothetical situation. They were instructed to suppose that they "were to hire a college graduate with a four-year degree which has specifically prepared him/her in the following areas: oral and written communication, mass media production and analysis, and organizational dynamics." Given this context, the respondents were presented with two separate 13-item indices:

a performance by the college graduate index and a training of others by the college graduate index. For the first index, respondents were requested to assess their perception of the importance of each item "for the college graduate to perform given your company's needs." The 13 items were prefaced with: "This employee is able to..." For the second index, respondents were asked to assess their perception of the importance of each item concerning "potential training functions of the college graduate." The 13 items in this index were prefaced with: "Training other employees to..." For both indices, individual item six-point response scales were provided, labeled at one end with "very unimportant" (coded as 1) and at the other end with "very important" (coded as 6).

The six remaining questions were concerned with the respondents' companies. Respondents' evaluation of the importance of "communication skills in your company's operation" was assessed on a six-point scale labeled in the same manner as were the two indices. Three questions concerned whether the company currently had a training program in communication skills, whether it was conducted in-house or by an external agency (or both), and what kinds of skills were taught. The number of employees in the Rochester (N.Y.)-Monroe County area was also requested. Finally, ten college course areas(plus an "other" response option) were presented and the respondents were asked to indicate which courses would improve the employability of college graduates for their company.[2]

Data analysis was performed using SPSS^X (1983). Listwise deletion of missing data was used for all statistical tests. Details on the statistical routines performed on the data are presented in the following section where appropriate.

RESULTS

The first research question asked: How important do employers feel communication skills are in their comapny's operation? Response to this question was extremely positive ($\bar{X}$ = 5.23, SD = .99). Although this response is very encouraging, the results may be a function of the question posed; openly disavowing the value of communication may be akin to slandering motherhood or denying social truisms--it simply is not done.

The second research question concerned the percentage of employers who had communication training programs. This was thought to be a better indicator than the above question of the value assigned by business professionals to communication since it suggests some commitment on the company's part. Just over one-third (38.5 percent) reported that their company had such a program. A t-test comparing those companies with and without a training program on the importance of communication question found no significant difference between the two groups ($t = .76$, $df = 63$, $p = .448$, two-tailed). In short, there was no difference in the value assigned to the importance of communication skills in company operations when businesses that have committed funds to communication training were compared to those which have not.

Sixty percent of the respondents who reported having a communication training program indicated that the training was conducted in-house, 12 percent employed an external agency, and 28 percent employed both in-house and external training.

The second research question also inquired as to the kinds of skills taught in such programs. Table 1 reports the responses to this open-ended question. Among the companies offering communication training programs, the greatest emphasis was on courses in listening, public presentational skills, writing, problem solving, interpersonal communication, and negotiation, in that order.

Table 1 about here

The third and fourth research questions asked about the importance assigned to the two 13-item indices of communication training and performance for college graduates as well as sought differences between companies which do and do not have communication training programs on these variables. Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation values for the two groups on all 26 items; the

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Table 2 about here

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the items are also rank-ordered according to the entire sample's mean response. As can be seen in the first column,

six of the top ten items were training functions. Of the 14 variables which had a 4.0 mean response or greater (indicating a positive evaluation), nine were training duties. Conversely, twice as many performance variables as training variables were rated as unimportant (eight to four variables respectively).

Overall, the most important communication variables were the college graduate's ability to train other employees to improve their listening skills, offer methods for improved interpersonal communication, employ persuasive techniques, and lead group meetings; the college graduate who could present oral reports was also highly evaluated. Least important were three performance variables (writing technical manuals and press releases and producing radio programs) and three training functions (preparing other employees for impromptu media contacts, public press conferences, and for overseas placement). The low ratings assigned to these activities may be due to the respondents' belief that virtually all of them more properly belong in, or are already performed by, their company's public relations department.

Are there differences in the importance assigned to these performance and training abilities between businesses which do and those which do not have communication training programs? Three multivariate analysis of variance tests were performed to answer this question. Two MANOVAs were performed entering the 13 variables on each index separately, by index, into the routine; in the third MANOVA, summated scores for each index were constructed before entering both summated indices and then computing the statistic. In all three instances, no significant difference ($p > .05$) between the

two groups was found (for the summated test, F = .292, df = 2/61, p = .748). Again, as was reported above, regardless of whether the organization had a communication training program for its employees, the importance, or value, of the 26 communication functions examined here was rated similarly.

The fifth research question concerned the relationship between employers' rated importance of the performance and the training variables. Using summated scores for each of the two indices, a Pearson product-moment correlation resulted in a significant ($p < .001$) positive relationship ($r = .59$). Both the absolute size of the coefficient and its significance level indicates that employers' ratings of the importance of college graduates' performance and training abilities were strongly related.

In addition, the fifth research question asked if there was a significant difference between the rated importance of the performance and the training variables. The summated scores for the two indices indicated somewhat greater importance assigned to the training than the performance index ($\bar{X} = 3.76$ and 3.55, respectively). Results of a t-test, however, showed that these means were not significantly different ($t = 1.53$, $df = 126$, $p > .05$, two-tailed).

The final research question inquired about the kinds of courses which would enhance the college graduate's employability. The top five responses, in order of popularity, were as follows (number of mentions in parentheses): business administration (60); computer applications (55); computer science (39); engineering (38); and statistics (24).

Other courses suggested by at least ten respondents were instructional technology, printing, survey research, and packaging science. The former courses might be seen as having a wider application throughout business and industry, whereas the latter tend to be limited to only a few relatively specialized companies, and therefore were not mentioned as frequently.

DISCUSSION

On the whole, the personnel directors surveyed in this study strongly endorsed the value of communication skills to their companies' operations. Mean score differences on this issue between those organizations which had implemented a communication training program and those which had not were nonsignificant, indicating that financial commitment to such programs was not a salient discriminating variable. Similarly, statistically nonsignificant differences were found when comparing the mean scores of performance and training indices between companies with and without communication training programs.

Perhaps these results suggest that while both categories of organizations recognize the value of their employees' communication skills, some companies wish to ensure or improve upon proficiency by offering training programs, while others perceive their employees as possessing adequate proficiency in these skills without need for further training. Another related interpretation of these data would be that

among companies which do not have training programs, job candidates who are perceived lacking an appropriate level of communication skills are weeded out in the candidate search process.

For the organizations which do offer communication training for their employees, the training subjects mentioned most often were generally consistent with survey rankings. In other words, the "training other employees to improve their listening skills" function, which was ranked first in mean score, was corroborated by the frequent mention of listening as part of existing organizational training (cited by eleven employers). Similarly, courses in public presentational skills, problem solving, and interpersonal communication were cited often.

Interestingly, prospective employees' ability to train other employees in various communication skills was rated somewhat higher in importance than was actual ability to perform a variety of communication functions themselves. Perhaps many of the performance variables were perceived as outside of the normal responsibilities of recent college graduates, and instead belonged to established organizational departments. For example: speech and press release writing, preparing company image-building programs, and producing audio-visual materials and radio programs might be the province of old-hands with high level familiarity with the organization; arbitration of employee grievances might be seen as the purview of personnel managers with extensive

training and experience in industrial relations; and technical manual preparation might be seen as the responsibility of appropriate division managers. Support for this interpretation is found in the training skills which were rated as relatively unimportant: negotiation strategies and overseas placement may "belong" to Personnel, while mass media contact and press conferences are the responsibility of Public Relations.

Nonetheless, the two indices of performance and training were found to be strongly and positively related and mean scores between the two indices did not differ significantly. Personal and training ability in proficient presentational skills was rated as highly important. Small group participation and leadership skills and training abilities were likewise evaluated as very salient. Possessing, and being able to train others in, effective interpersonal communication skills (including listening, persuasion, and analyzing communication problems), and having the ability to prepare in-house publications were also important attributes of the prospective employee. On these dimensions, where considerable similarity in the training and performance ratings were found, it might be suggested that these are specialized skills to which no existing department presently lays claim. These areas may be fertile ground in which graduates of speech communication programs would be particularly useful. In addition, skills in speaking, writing, listening, and in other interpersonal and group

communication functions, may have been perceived by respondents as appropriate and important for virtually all company employees in entry level positions.

Aside from requisite communication skills, employers indicated that training in business administration and computers is helpful for the prospective employee. The popularity of these courses--business administration, computer applications, and computer science--seemed to hold regardless of type of business or industry. On the other hand, certain other training suggestions, including engineering, statistics, printing, and packaging, served to reflect the peculiar needs of specific companies, and thus might not be advisable for all college graduates. Nonetheless, employers do appear to agree that familiarity with the business environment and with the use of computers is paramount.

CONCLUSION

Several studies and various anecdotal reports have generated an air of optimism for speech communication graduates seeking non-traditional careers. One could easily conclude that these graduates are capable of filling unique job needs outside of academe, provided that they possess an understanding of the contemporary business environment with a solid base in the liberal arts. However, in order for speech communication majors to find suitable non-academic employment which utilizes their

education, several conditions must be met.

First, the need for specialized communication skills and knowledge must be recognized by employers; without the ackowledgement that communication problems are seminal, yet solvable, concerns in the context of organizational operations, jobs may prove to be unavailable for anyone. The study reported herein lends additional support to the thesis that communication is perceived as vital to organizational health. Several employers offer training in communication for their employees and appear interested in hiring individuals who not only have competencies in speaking and writing, but who have the ability to train others to these general ends.

As a further precondition, employers must perceive the speech communication graduate as an appropriate individual for performing necessary communication functions in their organizations. At present, many of these responsibilities are carried out by those with little or no formal preparation.

Finally, in order to secure satisfying careers, speech communication graduates must be able to perform those communication functions expected of them, whatever they may be. In other words, curricula must be designed to address the common concerns of business and public service, as well as those of education. The study described here suggests coursework which might appropriately achieve such a goal, with courses both in speech communication and

in other disciplines, especially those of business and computer science.

When these preconditions are met--that is, when graduates have and are perceived to have the ability to meet the challenges of business, industry, and government--then the speech communication major will no longer be largely an apprenticeship for secondary and college teaching. Perhaps, as a result of a demand for speech communication graduates, job opportunities in teaching will experience growth as well.

FOOTNOTES

1. Excluding three persons in the sample who were either no longer employed by the firm or whose company had moved or gone out of business, the response rate is 86.6 percent (n = 82).

2. Copies of the questionnaire are available from the authors.

TABLE 1

Existing Training Courses: Skills Taught

Course or Program	Number of Mentions
1. Listening	11
2. Public presentations	9
3. Problem solving	6
3. Writing	6
5. Interpersonal communication	5
6. Negotiation	4

(n = 25)

TABLE 2

Employers' Ratings of the Importance of College Graduates' Ability to Perform and Train Other Employees in Various Communication Skills

	Overall		Overall Rank Order
	$\bar{X}$	SD	
Performance Variables			
Deliver oral reports	4.57	1.26	4
Lead training group meetings	4.46	1.26	6
Analyze communication breakdowns	4.24	1.38	9
Prepare in-house publications	4.22	1.54	10
Lead problem-solving groups	4.12	1.24	14
Prepare company image building programs	3.93	1.65	15
Produce audio-visual materials	3.84	1.45	16
Write speeches	3.34	1.51	18
Arbitrate employee grievances	3.27	1.90	19
Edit technical manuals	3.24	1.62	20
Write technical manuals	3.06	1.60	21
Write press releases	2.99	1.65	22
Produce radio programs	1.50	.94	26
Training Variables			
Improve listening skills	4.77	1.24	1
Methods for improved interpersonal communication	4.65	1.23	2
Utilize persuasive techniques	4.60	1.24	3
Lead group meetings	4.49	1.29	5
Participate in problem-solving groups	4.38	1.19	7
Deliver oral reports	4.31	1.39	8
Prepare oral reports	4.18	1.36	11
Participate in fact-finding conferences	4.13	1.17	12
Methods for efficient interoffice communication	4.[illegible]	1.27	13
Effective negotiation strategies	3.52	1.64	17
Impromptu mass media contacts	2.43	1.44	23
Public press conferences	2.03	1.23	24
Successful overseas placement	1.62	1.15	25

1 = unimportant; 6 = important

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